

Intro: [00:04](#) This is Force for Hire, a deep dive into private military contracting and how it's transforming the battlefield. I'm Michelle Harvin and I'm Desmond Farris.

Desmon Farris: [00:12](#) The defense industry has always been largely male dominated, but recently that's been changing. Now more than ever, women are taking critical leadership roles in the field. Four of the biggest defense contractors have women CEOs. While the Defense Department's top weapons buyer is also a woman.

Michelle Harven: [00:31](#) And for Neryl Joyce, the industry was actually far more open to her than the military. Neryl was a former Australian military police woman. And after a few years, her boss recommended her for officer training.

Neryl Joyce: [00:45](#) At the time I was also a parent to a one year old boy and trying to manage, um, the training and being a mum, the training was long hours. It was, uh, physically intense, but it was also mentally draining. The homework, the tactics, lessons, the essays, the, the, um, the field trips, it was a lot trying to balance that with being a mom. It was, it was really difficult. I was just lucky that he's, his dad took on the majority of those, um, those tasks for me. Um, but at the end of the training, it was obviously too much for my partner because he ended up splitting, splitting up with me the day before I was to March into my brand new unit as a lieutenant. So when you're rocking up trying to be a leader of men, I was also heartbroken at the same time trying not to burst into tears,

Michelle Harven: [01:45](#) But Neryl got through it and in fact went onto the Australian Army's elite close personal protection. Yeah.

Neryl Joyce: [01:51](#) It was around that time that the Iraq war started and a lot of my troops were being deployed to Iraq as part of an infantry company so that they could protect the Australian ambassador and his staff. Um, however, because I was a female and an officer, it wasn't looking, um, as though I would get deployed anytime soon. So it was pretty hard to take watching my troops deployed to Iraq and even being part of the training team, training them for ops overseas and then I couldn't go myself. So it was after, um, the first lot of treats returned back and they told me about the burgeoning private security contractors saying that was exploding over there in Iraq that I began to seriously looking at, um, transferring to a private army, um, so that I could do the job. And that's really what it came down to. I just wanted to have that real life experience doing a job that I'd been training all my life to do. And it's actually quite ironic that I had to do it in the private sector rather than the military in

order to be able to do it. Um, so, but in order to do that, I had to resign from the army, resigned my commission and lead the army before I could go to Iraq and become a private security contractor.

Neryl Joyce: [03:23](#) So basically I finished the army one day and the next day I was on the plane to Baghdad. Um, and the reason I was picked to go on this contract is because we were looking after the Iraqi electoral commissioners and four of them were females. So they needed, um, a female on the team to be able to, to handle or look after those female clients. And that's why I think it was quite ironic that, um, this job I've always wanted to do. I had to actually leave the army to be able to do it. Um, and you know, and that's why I'll never forsake the experience I had over there because they realized that men can do a lot of things, but if you've got a female client, you need a female security operative to take care of them. Uh, there was many things that the males couldn't do.

Neryl Joyce: [04:22](#) Our, um, my female clients were Muslim so they couldn't be touched by men from outside their family. So, um, at 1.1 of the men on my team went to shake this lady's hand and she's like, no, no, no, don't touch me. Don't touch me. So that's when I had to take over, especially when putting her into, um, her armor, her, her body vest and that, um, she didn't want to be touched or you know, looked after by them. So in that respect with kind of critical to have females on the team and it was, it was great to be valued. I didn't have any real fear of going over there and doing the job. I'd already, you know, I'd said to my mum, look, if, if I get blown up and lose my legs, Hey, I can just get some prosthetics and look, I saw a running magazine with the female running with, um, two prosthetic legs and she looked awesome.

Neryl Joyce: [05:23](#) I said, I can do that too. Um, I said, if I'm ever taken hostage, this is what my real thoughts are. Um, just know that I did this because I really wanted to. Your son was about five when you left. Yes. Yeah, he was five at the time. My relationship with these father was a bit kind of up and down and you kind of have your peaks and troughs you're getting on and then you're not getting on. And so when I told him I was going to Iraq and I asked him if he would look after after my son and he was more than happy and I knew my son would be safe and I knew he'd be loved. And I thought it was also a good opportunity for him to bond with his dad because we were living in different States at the time.

Neryl Joyce: [06:07](#) So he didn't get to see him that often. And yeah, I thought it would be good for him. But, um, before I left, I actually, I wrote a letter for him and I had a disc that had photos. It had all sorts of information from our life together and I left that with his dad so that if anything happened to me, he would, he would know about me. He'd know why I left. Um, what I'd left for him if I did pass away, you know, his inheritance and that and, and then a whole bunch of photos of us together. So, um, yeah, uh, fortunately I never had to give it to him.

Speaker 3: [06:51](#) So I worked for two different companies, um, the first one out of Edinburgh risk and security management. And then the second company I worked for was Blackwater. I initially thought that I was going to work with ex special forces guys, um, people that were trained in close protection. But when I arrived, um, yeah, it wasn't that at all. I found there were just some, had just been in the army as a soldier or a medic. Um, some hadn't even had any military training at all. Um, and that was quite shocking to me because I, there's no way I would have even been looked at. They were just people with some military skills, but not necessarily any idea on how to run a, a, um, high security escort or PSD as they call it over there. This was about halfway through. This was just before I left that company.

Neryl Joyce: [07:59](#) Um, I'd, I'd seen some issues with, with the leadership and it had me worried, they kind of became blasé to the actual risk there. It's like you travel that Baghdad airport road so many times that at some point you start to think your, um, invincible. You don't take proper risk assessments. And that was happening on a few occasions. And just, just before that particular mission I was, I'd, um, essentially left the team and there was a few issues between me and the team leader. But, um, before the team left, I actually spilled burning hot coffee down the front of me. So I had to drive myself to the, um, the hospital to get treatment. So I didn't leave with them that day. And when they left, um, we have SOP for what we do. If there's a road block, if the US soldiers have stopped all vehicles because they're looking out for suspected ID or something like that, and their SOP is, are to turn around and come back.

Neryl Joyce: [09:19](#) Like if it's, um, we've done it all the time and about, for some particular reason they decided that they weren't gonna turn around. And because our team operated in a covert manner, meaning that we didn't stand out as one of these large, high-profile PSD teams. We drove local cars. They weren't armored, we just blended in with traffic. But for some reason they started firing off warning shots to other vehicles saying, alright, we're Stuckey, we're stationary. No one's coming near us. But what

they did was identified themselves as a Western security team. And then they sat on that road until eventually, it wasn't long before, uh, insurgency recognize them and say, um, Western security team and opened up on them and uh, three of the team passed away. Um, it was other injuries both mental and physical. And you know, the lessons learned from there was it was poor tactics, poor leadership and um, not following the S the standard operating procedures for when you know, you're halted on that particular road being the most deadliest in the world.

Neryl Joyce:

10:40

That coming from the army, coming from a college that drummed into my head leadership and the responsibility of leadership and your people are your number one priority to go over there and find out suddenly people aren't being used for their skills and what they can bring the team. It's all about who you know and what they can get to. So as a result of that egos, it was all ego-driven. There was stupid tactical, tactical errors being made, but they just weren't listening to anyone that, that may have known any better. And it started to get dangerous. I mean, I was sent on a mission with five other people and we went along route Irish, we went to camp victory near Baghdad airport and one of our vehicles broke down. Now, rather than sending out a team to help recover us and bring us back, they said, well everyone, you just jump into that, I'm soft skin then and just drive for your lives back and hopefully you make it hand.

Neryl Joyce:

11:53

Um, I said, that's ludicrous. That is absolutely ludicrous. One bomb, we're all dead. It doesn't matter if you come and rescue us or not, we're all dead. Um, and not that they weren't, I didn't do anything about that. So luckily one of my friends, the other female on the team, she called up her boyfriend who was working for Blackboard or at the time on the little birds that they had, she called him up and told him what was going on. So between the two of them and someone nice at Blackboard or that allowed it to happen, um, they got their little bird up in the air and provided us protection on the way back. Um, but if it wasn't for her relationship with him, we wouldn't have got that. And I think that was the first time I quit the team until I was talked back into staying on the team.

Neryl Joyce:

12:46

And then they assured me they wouldn't send me on red zone missions. I could just do some admin and logistics and just work security in the green zone. The team leaders were also, at that particular time, they were having all night binge drinking sessions. Like this wasn't just once a week. This was starting to become every night and it was getting out of control. People

were hung over doing their job and it just, it just didn't feel safe anymore. And I didn't want to be put myself into a situation where, you know, my life depended on some guy that was hung over from a big night, the night before.

Desmon Farris: [13:29](#) When we come back Neryl faces one of her biggest challenges, yet

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Michelle Harven: [14:21](#) When Neryl started working for Blackwater, her environment change and made her more vulnerable, but maybe not to those you'd expect her threat came from within.

Neryl Joyce: [14:31](#) So I wasn't surrounded by a lot of team members as you are in that team environment. It was more just three of us. We all had our own separate demountable building to live in. We had different clients we had to look at, you know, we'd come together for maybe coffee in the morning if you went to maybe dinner in the evening. And so you kind of in a team but you kind of isolated. And I think that's how this particular person was able to um, orchestrate, uh, the assault through not being watched by other members of the team. Being able to be a little bit sly, slipping something into my dream and um, yeah, taking it from there, you could say, once I came to and realized what was going on, I grabbed my phone and I ran into the bathroom. We kind of had a little on suite, um, attached to our room and started trying to call someone, anyone.

Neryl Joyce: [15:40](#) And the, the, the phone system there was not at all regular. So I don't know how long it took me. It felt like hours, but eventually I was able to get one of my teammates that was in a red sign at the time and talk to him and God knows what I told him, but I just spoke for so long. Um, and eventually said, look, um, so, you know, we've got the country managers, they're on their way. They're going to be there any moment now. So he, he was talking to someone who was in contact, the country managers. So when they arrived, um, they knocked on the door. I saw it

was them and I was able to, um, come out, like adding my clothes. I was able to come out and basically I told them straight away what had happened. And they were very quick on the ball.

Neryl Joyce:

16:33

They organized, um, for one of my, actually my friend who I worked with on the previous contract, she had another job, but they rang up her, they got her to come over and see me straight away. We went to the hospital there, the military hospital, and they did their examination. They took my clothes so that they could also be examined. And the black water country manager K2 we called him. Uh, he said, look, go and stay with Beth. That was my friend's name. Stay with her and take some time. We'll organize counseling. We'll do whatever you need. And I said, look, I just, just want to stay with her for starters. So I did. And she looked after me. I stayed with her for about a week. And, um, and then I told them that I just wanted to get back to work. I didn't want to go home.

Neryl Joyce:

17:29

I didn't want to talk to anyone. I'd just, I'd had kind of a week to, to think about what had happened. I wrote my own statements so that I would remember what happens. I could give it to whomever when I had to. And I just wanted to go back to work and just feel normal and they let me. And so I did. I went back to work. Um, the guy was removed straight away from that site. Um, the perpetrator and, um, I just continued on. I had a few nights where I, um, for a little while they're sleeping with the light on, but I was just happy to get back into a routine and um, focus on why I was there in the first place. I didn't want to kind of, um, admit defeat and go home and never do security gain and be unemployed. I just wanted to, um, I guess I just wanted to move on and I did it was, I don't know, a couple of months

Neryl Joyce:

18:47

I met a man named Paul and I wasn't looking for love. I did, you know, I was shit scared to be quite honest to even think about moving on. But there was this part of me that was saying, if you let the sexual assault rule you, then you know, you're kind of done for that. They say, get back on the horse as soon as you fall off. And it was like, um, I didn't want to be afraid of being, you know, intimate with a person or being able to have a conversation. And believe me, I was pretty reserved, but, um, he was pretty persistent. Um, and I think that that also helped heal me as well cause I was very upfront about, you know, what had happened and where I was at and um, and his persistence in just being a friend initially, um, is really what, what helped me progress.

Neryl Joyce:

19:56

So he was also a security contractor at the time I was J I was, it was the night before I was supposed to leave Iraq for my break

and he just returned to Iraq working with a different company. And so it was kind of like we just saw each other for one night and there was a bit of a spark. Um, and then I left for my break. He continued to stay in Iraq and work and we just kept communicating with each other over emails and that. And I thought, well, if he's communicating, you know, he must be interested. He seems like a nice bloke. And then when I returned to Iraq, um, he was there and I guess, you know, I'd had a couple of months off, I'd been with my son again and living the life of a stay at home mum and then returning back to Iraq and, and meeting up with, with Paul again and finding some common ground between my child.

Neryl Joyce: [21:00](#)

He had two children at the time and talking about our military and his policing lives and what we were doing there in Iraq. Um, I guess yeah, drew us even closer together. And I guess also being an environment where it's inherently dangerous, I think that also speeds up, um, relationships as well. So, um, you know, 20 days is like two years, 40 days is like four years. And then, uh, he's your now husband, is that right? Yeah, yeah. He convinced me to move to Perth, which I did. So my son and I moved over here and, um, he continued to work in Iraq for a couple of years afterwards and I moved over here to Perth, settled my son into school, got to see what it was like being a stay at home mum being looked after by a husband. And I found I got bored of that pretty quickly.

Neryl Joyce: [22:03](#)

So, so I rejoined the army as a part time soldier and did a bit of part time army bit of being a mom and tried a few other careers along the way. So when I got into contracting I thought, well this gives me the opportunity to go away, do two or three months full on security contracting, doing all the fun worry, security, um, high adrenaline type stuff. And then I can come home and just be a stay at home mum. I can, you know, bake those cupcakes for parties. I can, you know, wear girly clothes. I can take him to soccer training. Um, and well, I loved the idea of doing that. So yeah, that's the one thing that PSU security contracting gave me that ability to, to balance both. And I thoroughly enjoyed it. There's no greater feeling than taking a vulnerable person and allowing them to complete their job, which is vitally important. Getting them there safely, looking after them while they give their speech or conduct their business and then getting them back safe again. There's a real sense of fulfillment that you've done something to progress the country. Um, and yeah, it was amazing. And you know, despite some of the, the hairy situations and some of the bad stuff, I would not take back that experience. I, um, thoroughly loved it. It was fantastic. Huge

Michelle Harven: [23:46](#) Thank you to Neryl Joyce for talking with us. Next week will be our final episode of the series. We'll be talking about the future. What's next for private military contracting, the most pressing issues in the space right now and address some other topics. We couldn't fit in the series, like how many contractors actually make up our government's intelligence.

Outro speaker: [24:13](#) Someone from the, uh, actually from the NSA gave a presentation and parts of her presentation were, were leaked to me and, and there was this pie chart that said 70% of the money went to private PRI, the private sector, 70% of the intelligence budget.

Desmon Farris: [24:31](#) Don't forget to subscribe and while you're there, leave us a review. You can also let us know your thoughts at [podcast@stripes.com](mailto:podcast@stripes.com) also follow us on Twitter for updates [@starsandstripes](#).

Michelle Harven: [24:42](#) Force for Hire's supervising editors are Bob Reid and Terry Leonard. Digital team lead and editor is Michael Darnell.

Outro speaker: [24:50](#) Thanks for listening. This is Force for Hire